

A Hard School for Hard Men: Guerrillas Such as the James Boys Became Outlaws

The Missouri-Kansas border troubles did not end with the Civil War

By Frederick J. Chiaventone

For the next few years Americans will continue to commemorate the brutal conflict that nearly tore the nation apart 150 years ago. Naturally the bulk of Civil War sesquicentennial activities will take place in the East, with reenactors and spectators flocking to places like Gettysburg, Shiloh and Antietam. Often overlooked, however, is the bitter conflict that raged on the far bank of the Mississippi River, especially in Missouri and Kansas, and how the war in the American West helped shape the nation's collective memory. Combatants in the West were fighting over the issues that fomented the Civil War for almost a decade before Confederate Brig. Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard directed the April 1861 bombardment of Fort Sumter. The Western conflict also spawned some of America's most infamous outlaws, many of whom shared a common mentor.

The troubles that led to the Missouri-Kansas Border War began in 1854 when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, establishing Kansas and Nebraska territories and ensuring that when their respective inhabitants petitioned for statehood, they would determine whether their state would allow or forbid slavery. The tensions exacerbated by this act manifested themselves immediately in Kansas Territory, so strongly divided that it actually had two competing governments. Thousands of proslavery and antislavery adherents descended on the area, political frictions devolved into physical clashes, and newspaperman Horace Greeley soon dubbed the embattled new territory "Bleeding Kansas."

In this violent climate men used force of arms to resolve disputes. Wild-eyed abolitionist John Brown plunged into the fray



Jesse James was a Rebel border guerrilla.

and performed his first acts of violence on the frontier in 1856 with a bloody raid on farms along Kansas' Pottawatomie Creek followed by a battle with proslavery forces at Osawatimie. Brown would retreat and set his sights east on Harpers Ferry, but the damage was done.

Because frontier life was hard and often tedious, the prospect of riding with either an antislavery Jayhawker outfit or a proslavery Border Ruffian unit was attractive to young men. Removed from the restraining influences of parents and civil authorities, thousands of venturesome males—many still in their teens—flocked to either side and plunged headfirst into the kind of combat described by past historians as "war to the knife."

Leading the Jayhawkers was Jim Lane, a fire-breathing former Indiana congressman who moved to Kansas Territory in 1855 and raised a force of irregulars later designated the Kansas Brigade. The brigade mounted cross-border raids into Missouri, ostensibly to promote Free Soil values but in fact cutting a wide swath of destruction, pillaging and burning homesteads, then returning with plunder to its

home base in Lawrence, Kansas Territory. On the other side of the Missouri, irregular cavalry units collectively known as Border Ruffians sprang up to return the favor with a vengeance. The violence intensified when Kansas became a free state on January 29, 1861.

With war declared, thin, erect former schoolteacher William Clarke Quantrill raised an independent guerrilla force. He referred to his unit as the Missouri Partisan Rangers, which soon gained notoriety as Quantrill's Raiders. Quantrill surrounded himself with some of the roughest men on the frontier, including Archibald "Little Archie" Clement, Dave Poole, Frank and Jesse James, and Cole and Jim Younger. Many of the truly hard cases gravitated to the subcommand of William T. Anderson, still in his 20s, a ferocious fighter and borderline psychotic who earned the nickname "Bloody Bill."

Anderson was notorious for his fanatic behavior—merciless in any encounter with Federal troops or sympathizers and giving no quarter to opponents. His men mutilated the corpses of their foes, decorating their horses with the scalps and severed ears of Federal troops. Though such brutal conduct alienated most Confederate officers, higher-ups tolerated Anderson for a time, as his unit tied up large numbers of Federal forces.

Quantrill took the concept of total war to a new level when his guerrillas attacked Lawrence on August 21, 1863. In Kansas City the week before the raid a building serving as a temporary prison for women with ties to Quantrill's Raiders had collapsed, killing four women, including one of Anderson's sisters. The results for Lawrence were catastrophic. Some 400 of Quantrill and Anderson's rage-fueled followers slaughtered an estimated 200

men and boys (mostly civilians), looted banks and stores, and burned the business district to the ground. Riding with the raiders were two young men whose exploits would extend long past war's end—Cole Younger and Frank James.

Earlier in the war James had served with the Southern-allied Missouri State Guard, seeing action in the August 10, 1861, Battle of Wilson's Creek near Springfield, Mo. Later captured by Union troops, he was paroled and allowed to return to his Clay County, Mo., home. By the spring of 1864, however, James had reentered the fray under Quantrill, whom Frank called "a demon in battle." Joining Frank was his 16-year-old brother, Jesse.

On September 27, 1864, Bloody Bill Anderson's band (including Jesse James) stopped a train at Centralia, Mo., discovering among its passengers 25 unarmed Federal troops headed home on leave. Anderson reportedly strode among the captured troops announcing: "I ask no quarter and give none. Every Federal soldier on whom I put my finger shall die like a dog. If I get into your clutches, I expect death. You are all to be killed and sent to hell. That is the way every damned soldier who falls into my hands shall be served." He then supervised their slaughter.

Anderson spared one sergeant (for a prisoner swap), who managed to elude his captors days later. Before escaping, the sergeant watched Anderson's band turn the tables on a pursuing 155-man Union force that outnumbered the guerrillas 2-to-1. But the Yankees, armed with single-shot rifles, were at a disadvantage, as the guerrillas each carried at least two revolvers. The 39th Missouri Infantry Regiment, under Major A.V.E. Johnston, got off just one ineffective volley before Anderson's men overran and slaughtered 116 of them, including Johnston. Jesse James reportedly fired the fatal pistol ball into the Union officer's head.

In the wake of the Lawrence and Centralia raids, the Confederate leadership in Richmond, Va., decided the Border Ruffians were a liability and refused to sanction their actions. Quantrill and Anderson, however, continued to operate outside the laws of war and societal conventions. By June 1865 both men were dead and their followers scattered. But partisan feelings ran deep in the region, and few were willing to forgive or forget guerrilla actions during the war. The Missouri state constitution of 1865 did not grant amnesty to Confederate guerrillas and kept Southern sympathizers from voting or holding office.



Frank James and Cole Younger participated in the raid on Lawrence, Kan.

Frank James surrendered on July 26, 1865, and was paroled, but Jesse had not been as fortunate. In May 1865 when he tried to surrender under a white flag in Lexington, Mo., Union soldiers shot him in the lung. Fearing similar retribution, former bushwhackers grouped together in outlaw gangs. The James brothers teamed with Cole Younger and brothers in a gang that was to make an indelible imprint on the Wild West.

On February 13, 1866, members of what would become the James-Younger Gang struck the Clay County Savings Association in Liberty, Mo., in the first daylight bank robbery in U.S. history. In subsequent raids on savings associations, banks, stagecoaches and trains, the gang cut a wide swath across the Midwest and the nation's conscious-

ness, though not until the December 1869 robbery of the Daviess County Savings Association in Gallatin, Mo., were the James brothers clearly identified among the culprits.

The composition of the band changed often as its members fell to the guns of lawmen and others. *Kansas City Times* founder John Newman Edwards, who had been an aide to Confederate Brig. Gen. Joseph Shelby, offered alibis and justification for the Missouri guerrillas turned outlaws. Indeed, Edwards' 1877 book *Noted Guerrillas* lionized the men who had ridden with Quantrill and Anderson. He corresponded with Jesse James

and filled the *Times* with florid prose in admiration of James' lawless exploits, describing one bloody holdup as "a feat of stupendous nerve and fearlessness that makes one's hair rise to think of it, with a condiment of crime to season it, becomes chivalric; poetic; superb." Edwards knew that spectacular crimes sold newspapers, and tying the outlaws' activities to the "Lost Cause" was just good business.

But the former bushwhackers soon made as many enemies as adherents. Outlawry was bad for most other businesses, and public perception was that Missouri had become a bad investment. Resentful Missourians gunned down Archie Clement and Oliver Shepherd, lynched Tom Little and caved in Dick Burns' head with an ax. Hounded by local lawmen and the fledgling Pinkerton National Detective Agency, the survivors lay low except when staging raids. Their successors quarreled and sometimes fought. It was a hard life characterized by suspicion, distrust and paranoia. In forging his guerrilla band, Bloody Bill Anderson could not have perceived his dual role as headmaster of a hard school of outlawry that would plague the country with domestic violence for generations and help shape the history of the Wild West. **ww**